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Citation for published version:

Fergusson, D 2017, 'Visual Images and Reformed Anxieties: Some Scottish Reflections', *Princeton Theological Review*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 25–34. <http://ptr.ptsem.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/ptr_fall_2017.pdf>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Princeton Theological Review

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Visual Images and Reformed Anxieties: Some Scottish Reflections

David Fergusson

‘If you get bored during the sermon, don’t count the organ pipes – look at the stained glass window’ – advice to a young worshipper in a Scottish kirk.

Throughout the most recent phase of his academic career, Gordon Graham has done much to promote the intellectual commerce between Princeton and Scotland. Begun in Aberdeen, his leadership of the Centre for the Study of Scottish Philosophy has flourished from its Princeton base during the last decade. A plethora of conferences, publications and the consolidation of a scholarly journal dedicated to the subject have followed. And through his occupancy of the Chair at Princeton Theological Seminary, he has expertly combined the study of religion, philosophy and the arts with his characteristic vision, intellectual acumen and indefatigable enthusiasm. In honouring a former colleague and valued friend, I am pleased to offer these modest reflections on the Reformed churches and the arts.

1. Blasting the Past

The Reformed tradition has often been charged with an aesthetic deficit. Given the destruction of images, paintings and stained glass in churches after the Reformation, we stand guilty as charged. Allied to this is a series of theological attacks on images amongst several of the leading Reformed theologians. Despite some exceptions, this iconophobia was not matched by Lutherans or Anglicans. A visit to the town church of Wittenberg affords a striking view of Lukas Cranach’s altar triptych depicting Luther preaching to a small congregation that includes his wife and family, his students, colleagues and fellow townspeople. Installed in 1547 after his death, Luther is depicted here pointing to the figure of the crucified Christ, whose loin cloths blowing in the breeze symbolise the power of the Spirit moving amongst the people of this small church.¹ Calvin, by contrast, would never have tolerated such representation in the church. His self-effacing style was carried to the grave with the instruction that there was to be no tomb or stone to mark his last resting place.

In their reluctance to admit images into the sanctuary or to acknowledge the contribution that these make to the understanding and internalising of the Christian faith, the Reformed churches have generally been perceived as more austere. Attitudes to the theatre and dancing have often been censorious. In 1649, an Act of the General Assembly in Scotland condemned the practice of ‘promiscuous dancing’ at penny weddings. When a man died as a result of dancing at his own wedding celebration, this was viewed by the Presbytery of Duns as signalling ‘the displeasure of God against the form of his marriage.’² Regarded as a sensuous stimulus, dancing was feared for generating a loss of inhibition and instilling of lewd and licentious habits. Perhaps it did sometimes. But doubtless all this has contributed to the stock criticism that Reformed culture has been repressive in the ways in which it has

¹ This represents the beginning of a new Protestant iconography. See William A. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 55–57.

² Presbytery of Duns, 3 January 1721. Quoted by Ralph E. Graham, *Ecclesiastical Discipline in the Church of Scotland, 1690–1730*, (University of Glasgow, PhD thesis, 1964), 137. See also Henry Grey Graham, *The Social Life of Scotland in the 18th Century* (London: A&C Black, 1899), 327–328.

enthralled not only congregations but entire societies. Three brief examples of this trend towards blanket criticism may suffice.

Iain Crichton Smith's haunting rejection of his Presbyterian upbringing in the west highlands of Scotland scarcely conceals the anguish that this could produce. Recalling the black-hatted and white-collared ministers of Lewis, he remarks that 'with their tight-lipped brilliance, they have suppressed the magic of the theatre.'³

In his reflections on Scottish painting, J. D. Fergusson, the celebrated Scottish colourist, presents Calvinism as a cipher for everything that is detrimental to the flourishing of the arts, national self-esteem, and the liberation of the human spirit. His entertaining study is not prone to scholarly scruples and Fergusson admits that he doesn't know much about John Knox. But Calvinism is still accredited with all that is bleak and grim in Scottish society.

[T]he Calvinist...revels in the enjoyment of seeing people stopped, frustrated, deprived. He can do with little food, without alcohol, without theatres, dance halls, cinemas and other abodes of the devil: with plenty of strong tea, bread and jam, the exultation of seeing someone fail in the attempt to get some joy out of life, and the conviction that Calvinism is Christianity.⁴

More recently, my colleague Richard Williams has written a book arguing that the Victorian architecture of Morningside betokens the sexual repression of Presbyterian culture in Scotland's capital city. Its elegance notwithstanding, the rows of buildings on this south side district lack a fully expressive force in their restraint, concealment and austerity. With a clear divide between the public and private faces of these dwellings, an outward propriety is maintained at all costs, further reinforced by the crowds who attend the sundry local churches at 'Holy Corner'. Williams' thesis is provocative and challenging, even though the property market suggests that Morningside houses remain an excellent investment.⁵

This relentless castigation of Calvinism needs to be balanced by a more positive reading of the influence of the Kirk on Scottish society. The achievements of the Scottish Enlightenment suggests a cultural flourishing that was facilitated rather than obstructed by the educational system promoted by the Kirk with high standards of literacy attained throughout society. Throughout the nineteenth century, this was often matched by the work of scientists, philosophers, novelists, theologians, missionaries and environmentalists whose contributions now seem disproportionate to the size of the country that produced them. The recent commemorations of the Reformation have pointed towards a release of energy in the secular world that so often seemed to accompany Protestantism, though doubtless allied to other forces.⁶ While this does not negate necessary criticism, it signals the need for a more balanced assessment. At the very least, we should cease adopting the term Calvinist as a proxy for all our psychological and social ailments.

³ Iain Crichton Smith, *Murdo: The Life and Works*, Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001) 227.

⁴ J. D. Fergusson, *Modern Scottish Painting* (Glasgow: Luath Press, 2015). The work was first published in 1943.

⁵ 'Morningside's very architecture seemed to be repression written in stone....The repression I thought I saw in the everyday architecture of the city was only underlined further by the density of the churches in the area, not abandoned as they would be in any sensible secular city, but thronged every Sunday, each one offering its own unique proscription of the libido.' Towards the end of his study, he concedes that much of this reaction is his own negative projection. Richard Williams, *Sex and Buildings: modern architecture and the sexual revolution* (Reakton, 2013). 8.

⁶ See for example Alec Ryrie, *Protestants: The Radicals who Made the Modern World* (London: Collins, 2017).

Artistic suppression often resulted more in refraction than in the extinguishing of activity. Architecture, portrait painting, and literature flourished in different ways, often outside the immediate environs of the church. With the emergence of Enlightenment ideals, often promoted by theologians and preachers, these spheres of activity flourished, especially from about the middle of the eighteenth century. The original design of Edinburgh New Town by James Craig, the subsequent buildings of Adam and Playfair, the poetry of Fergusson and Burns, the painting of Raeburn and Wilkie – all provide striking examples of cultural flourishing in Presbyterian Scotland. Around the same time, philosophers such as Hutcheson, Hume, and Reid provided important reflections on the nature of aesthetics.

The place of music within the Reformed tradition has often been studied. There is little doubt that the internalising of the faith was aided by the memorising and regular singing of metrical psalms, and later by paraphrases and hymns. Uncluttered and simple, church buildings came to express grace, mercy and light.⁷ Within the printed Bible, numerous illustrations of figures and scenes were included. The setting apart of sanctuaries for weekly worship, civic occasions and important rites of passage ensured that the shape and furnishing of a building would have a profound impact upon its users. Ensuring that it was painted, varnished and regularly cleaned reflected a commitment not only to its utility but also its beauty. Church furnishings were valued and wooden carvings appreciated, while stained glass and pulpit falls would become later objects of intense interest and pride.

Why then did the impression arise that the Reformed tradition was hostile to visual images? The sources of this antipathy are readily traced in several leading figures of the sixteenth century. In what follows, I inspect these arguments for the sake of assessing their validity, before offering some musings on where the Reformed tradition should proceed from here.

2. Sixteenth-century iconophobia

Luther appears to have moved from a position of indifference to the presence visual images in church to a recognition that they can have a useful subordinate role in illustrating the stories of Scripture and in highlighting the two notes of the church – the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. By contrast, for Zwingli the sovereignty of God, the uniqueness of Christ, and the necessity of faith tend to exclude the traditional role of visual images. Christ is mediated, but only by the written and preached Word. This must be received in faith. Hence the external contemplation of an image cannot substitute for the inward act. In dichotomising the subject in this way, Zwingli inclines towards a series of dualisms between inner and outer, faith and sensory perception, the spiritual and the physical. And, as a consequence of these binary distinctions, visual images belong on the wrong side with a tendency towards idolatry, loss of comprehension, and false works.⁸ Is this fair?

The abuse of material objects can no doubt result in superstitious habits. The contemplation of an image or the touching of a relic do not put one right with God or secure some special protection from harm. Here some protest requires to be registered, though we might also

⁷ Lee Palmer Wandel shows how this generated a different aesthetic rather than the absence of one. See *The Reformation: Towards a New History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 202.

⁸ For further discussion of the Reformed 'iconophobes' see Sergiusz Michalski, *The Reformation and the Visual Arts: The Protestant image question in Western and Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge 1993), 43–74.

admit that Protestants have generated their own peculiar forms of superstition.⁹ So far, so good. But might not images serve some useful function in the promotion of faith, as Luther seemed to recognise? Zwingli's own German treatise on the Lord's Supper carries a title page with four woodcut images depicting a Passover meal, the provision of manna in the wilderness, the feeding of the five thousand, and the Last Supper.¹⁰ These illustrations explain the way in which the practice of communion should be understood by the people of Zurich. The recourse to such images points to the inherent weakness in the Reformed position. As sensory beings, we are reliant upon the deliverances of sight, sound, touch, scent and taste to know the world. And our knowledge of God no less relies upon such forms of mediation. Given that the Reformed churches recognised this with respect to hearing, speaking and singing, we must ask whether the hyper-allergic condemnations of images were an over-reaction resulting in some significant losses that we have been slow to recover. Assuming their usefulness, one might ask why images should not be placed in the sanctuary to assist the true worship of God. Are we so prone to distraction, so susceptible to abuse that these require altogether to be prohibited? Zwingli believed that this was the case with respect to representations of the human Christ in the church. 'I have never seen in churches a cross displayed without one making it into an idol.'¹¹ Here the object of attack is the crucifix which Zwingli viewed as generating a slippery slope towards idolatry. Elsewhere, however, he can contemplate the use of visual representations of Christ, provided that these are historical depictions, in domestic settings. In this context, they serve a pedagogical function in pointing towards Jesus as he is attested in the gospels. When restricted to this illustrative function, the tendency towards idolatry was apparently checked.

Calvin's rejection of images shows more subtlety, developing further consideration of the ways in which God is mediated to us in the world.¹² The notion of an image is not itself faulty. Without images, we cannot apprehend God. But, for Calvin, the imperative is to consider those images by which God accommodates the divine being. This notion of 'meditated immediacy'¹³ is vital to his theological epistemology. In revealing the divine self to embodied humans, God must adapt creaturely materials. These mediate both the divine majesty and condescension. Unless we capture this dynamic, we fail to understand the central conviction of Calvin's theology.

Although the language of accommodation is applied more extensively, in the context of understanding his critique of visual images, three media are significant. These are the created world, our neighbours, and the two sacraments. The entire cosmos attests the glory of God. With his love of astronomy, Calvin was profoundly aware of how the stars and planets convey a sense of divine majesty. Other people, moreover, bear the image of God. This is one reason why poverty is offensive to God and to be ameliorated by a more equal distribution of material goods. And, third, we do not require visual images in church to communicate a sense

⁹ I am thinking here of the tendency to decode every circumstance in one's life as if it were a sign from God attesting some blessing, reproof, warning or correction. See Alexandra Walsham, *Providentialism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁰ See Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, 59–61.

¹¹ Quoted by Charles Garside, *Zwingli and the Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 171.

¹² For his criticism of images see Institutes 1.11. Further discussion is offered by Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, 62–89, and Randall Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

¹³ John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938?), 1778–198.

of God's grace, since we have been given by Christ himself the water of baptism and the elements of bread and wine for sacramental use. These physical images should be sufficient for us in reinforcing the message of the Word of God which is the primary means of divine revelation. 'By these our eyes ought to be more steadily fixed, and more vividly impressed, than to require the aid of the images which the wit of man may devise.'¹⁴ Hence in stripping churches bare, Calvin believed (wrongly) that the Reformed churches were returning to the universal practice of the church during its first five hundred years.

Registered in Calvin's theology, these shifts in understanding oppose any sense of the divine presence being concentrated in a particular object or place – this is reflected also in his discouraging the practice of visiting the sanctuary for acts of private devotion outside services of public worship. The glory of God is everywhere apparent to the eye of faith. By reposing upon the Word alone, we can discern God in our world and in other people. Yet, when introduced to the church, human works of art are judged an obstacle to such perception rather than an aid. Does this merely reflect Calvin's own context or should it function as a universal prescription?

3. Bullinger assessed

A clear and concise summation of the Reformed position can be found in Heinrich Bullinger's Second Helvetic Confession (1566) Chapter IV.¹⁵ Images of God are to be forbidden on the basis of the second commandment. In essence invisible, God cannot be represented by a visual image – any attempt to depict God in visual form will be misleading and deceitful. Although Christ assumed our human nature, 'he did not on that account assume it in order to provide a model for carvers and painters.' Bullinger takes the view that Christ's bodily presence is not profitable for the church – what matters is that he abides in us by his Spirit. And since the saints forbade worship of themselves while on earth, we should not perpetuate this practice now that they are in heaven. Since their adoration is particularly abhorrent, we should forbid such depiction. Having thus argued for the prohibition of images on account of their negative effects, Bullinger proceeds to offer more positive considerations against their use. Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel, not its painting, he asserts. And in establishing the two sacraments, he has provided us with images that can signify this same gospel. Finally, in the case of the saints, we are surrounded by the witness of our fellow believers who should present a more vivid impression of the gospel than depictions of those long dead. Each of these arguments can be contested in sequence.

i) When Michelangelo depicted the finger of God reaching out to Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, did he assume that that his viewers would assume that God was an old man in the sky? That seems unlikely. Most would have recognised this as a symbolic representation of an imperceptible event, namely the creation of the first human being as narrated in the opening chapter of Genesis. A similar meaning would readily be attached to Blake's *Ancient of Days* or to Rublev's celebrated icon of the Trinity as the three men by the oaks of Mamre. These obviously human depictions of God might in themselves be seen as acknowledging the impossibility of seeing the divine with one's eye. With their unabashed anthropomorphism, they concede the point that of course God cannot be visualized. The representation is instead

¹⁴ *Institutes* 1.11.13.

¹⁵ See Arthur C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* (London: SCM, 1966), 229.

an arresting image that provokes further thought and sensibility, or in the case of the icon focuses prayer and devotion in relation to an invisible and ineffable reality.

ii) Even more problematic is the claim that Christ's bodily presence is not profitable for the church. This seems to run counter to the logic of the incarnation. The appearance of the Word in flesh is precisely for our benefit. 'We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.' (1 John 1:1) Bullinger's point seem to be that following the ascension of Christ, the church is no longer dependent upon his bodily presence but rather knows him through the power of the Spirit. This seems correct insofar as it goes, yet one wants to ask whether the gospel stories (as the oral and written record of his incarnate life) might not be illustrated and represented by works of human art. Can their significance for each generation not be artistically translated? One might even venture the claim that this is a responsibility rather than merely an open possibility.

iii) Representations of the followers of Christ are also to be prohibited. Bullinger assumes that the practice of the veneration of the saints will quickly transition into outright worship and idolatry. Although there may have been legitimate contextual reasons for diminishing the significance of the saints as intermediaries who derogate from the authority of Christ, this now appears less plausible as a permanent proscription on any visual representation of the followers of Christ. The celebration of heroic examples of faith became a key source of Protestant inspiration, for example in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563) which included over sixty woodcut illustrations and went through numerous editions. The historical realism of these images was in part intended to avoid replicating the cult of the saints but the use of visual imagery promoted a distinctively Protestant iconography that requires some nuancing of the standard arguments against imagery. In any case, Catholic depictions of the saints can themselves overcome the standard Protestant complaint. In discussing El Greco's 'saintly' pictures, Gordon Graham notes that their 'otherworldly' characteristics are intended to inspire the faithful here and now. As images of hope for mundane lives, these are 'visually aspirational' in encouraging people to seek a spiritual realm they inhabit, but often fail to recognize.¹⁶

iv) Preaching and teaching of the faith assume a priority by virtue of Christ's command to his disciples in Matthew 28:19–20. In one respect, Bullinger is correct. There is no injunction to paint or sculpt in the words of the risen Jesus. But nor is there any prohibition which leaves us with the possibility that artistic representation of Christ, the church or the world may assist rather than displace the dominical command. The concession to historical paintings of Scriptural stories for domestic use seems to admit this possibility. And the presence of illustrative images in printed Bibles is surely to be understood in similar terms as an auxiliary device for complementing the written Word.

v) The sacraments offer visible and tangible signs of God's promise to us. Instituted by Christ, do they not suffice for faith? The focus on Word and sacrament suggests that the simplicity of a small meeting house is in no way disadvantaged by contrast with a finely adorned cathedral as a place of true worship. Although this may be one of the enduring insights of the Reformation, it does not negate the additional benefit of visual imagery in the

¹⁶ Gordon Graham, *Philosophy, Art and Religion: Understanding Faith and Creativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 71.

sanctuary or its use to assist the preaching of the Word any more than singing or unaccompanied music do. Consider the following example. The reappearance of stained glass in Scottish Presbyterian churches in the middle of the nineteenth century signalled a recovery of a practice that had disappeared after the Reformation. If the commissioning of such work appeared controversial in 1856 when the first stained glass window was installed at Greyfriars Kirk, the practice soon became widespread. While these windows were intended to offset the austere and monochrome appearance of Reformed sanctuaries, they also served a pedagogical purpose in drawing attention to Biblical characters and stories.¹⁷

vi) This last point may also provide a corrective to the final argument advanced by Bullinger. Recalling and depicting the saints of the church may have led to the excesses and distractions apparent in his own day. But whether this need always be the case is doubtful. Protestants soon developed their own roll-call of inspiring examples of faith. These became appropriate subjects for instructing and encouraging others to do likewise. Where his argument has some purchase is its eschewal of any binary division between those set apart as saints of the church and the ordinary Christians who surround us in our own churches. But we do not require to neglect the saints of yesterday to do justice to those of today. And representing the life of Jane Haining, the schoolteacher who followed her Jewish pupils from Budapest to Auschwitz, is a powerful witness to the ways in which ordinary Christians from our midst have served God with selfless courage and steadfastness.¹⁸

Conclusion

The marks or notes of the church in Word and sacrament may be exclusive, but these should not discount the complementarity of visual images and material objects. The theological and ethical priorities of the Reformed tradition may provide directionality for the appropriate use of the visual arts in the life of the churches. These may often result in aesthetic forms such as simplicity, sobriety and order.¹⁹ But a greater sensitivity to the ways in which the visual arts can assist faith and worship may be now required of the Reformed churches as a further manifestation of the *semper reformanda* principle. Given the undisciplined appearance of Powerpoint in worship, together with the visual images that populate church websites and social media, this may be an opportune moment carefully to reappraise the tradition. If this involves a greater appreciation of Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican uses of art, then so much the better for receptive ecumenism.

¹⁷ See for example Michael Donnelly, *Scotland's Stained Glass: Making the Colours Sing* (Edinburgh: Historic Scotland, 1997).

¹⁸ In 1948, two stained glass windows in memory of Jane Haining and her Jewish pupils were dedicated at Queen's Park Govanhill Church, Glasgow.

¹⁹ I have reflected further on this in 'Aesthetics of the Reformed Tradition', *Worship and Liturgy in Context: Studies of Theology and Practice*, (eds.) Duncan B. Forrester and Douglas C. Gay, (London: SCM, 2009), 23–35.